



First To Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps

By Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak,
U.S. Marine Corps (Retired)

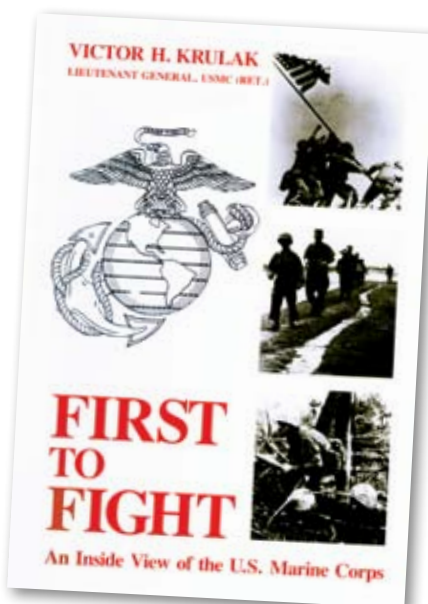
Reviewed by General James T. Conway,
Commandant of the Marine Corps

In June 2007, CMC Conway anointed Lieutenant General Krulak's thin but pungent volume *First to Fight* the "marquee title" on his updated Commandant's Reading List, the one book he wanted every one of his

Marines, officer and enlisted, to read. A year earlier, in the October 2006 issue of *Proceedings*, then-CNO Admiral Mike Mullen unveiled his Navy Professional Reading Program. Following the lead of the two service chiefs, we want to do our part to encourage professional reading. The monthly Book Review section has long been one of our most popular features. A new column, On Further Review, kicks off with this issue. Each month, a highly credentialed writer will take a second look at a classic of military literature, describe the significance of the book, and explain why it remains important—or just worth reading—today. The word "classics" will be loosely interpreted. The *Art of War* by Sun Tzu and *On War* by Carl von Clausewitz certainly qualify, but so do Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny* and Richard McKenna's *The Sand Pebbles*. Appropriately, General Conway leads off.

First to Fight is a timeless classic. Published almost a quarter-century ago, it was written with one eye on the past and the other eye toward the future. For today's reader, the book remains instructive because it shows how the Corps developed as a fighting organization over the years, while also providing the historical context for Marines to think about the way ahead. *First to Fight* invites us to think and debate answers to the question, "How does the Marine Corps continue to best serve this great nation through the uncertainty and threats that lie ahead?"

Lieutenant General Victor H. "Brute" Krulak retired in 1968. As he finished the book, published by the Naval Institute Press in 1984, he was able to look back on a career that spanned three wars and



four decades. He was a warrior and one of the Corps' great thinkers and innovators. In 1948, he co-authored the first Marine Corps field manual on the employment of helicopters. "We had so little to go on," he said. "No data; just conviction." The Marine Corps did not have any helicopters, either, but conviction had carried the day in the past for the innovators at Quantico. Before World War II—and before the Marine Corps had its own landing craft, as Krulak reminds us—Quantico was studying ways in which the nation could put an assault force across a hostile shore. Today, after the successful deployment this year of Marine Tilt Rotor Squadron 263 to Iraq—the first test in combat of the MV-22 Osprey—the Marine Corps is again looking to the future for ways to expand the employment of a new capability.

There are 14 chapters in the book, grouped under six titles. The title headings enumerate the ethos of the Corps as

a collection of thinkers, innovators, improvisers, penny pinchers, brothers, and fighters. Through the mixture of historical vignettes with his own informed opinions and observations, Krulak creates the image of a fighting outfit whose character developed through adaptation, innovation, and a stubborn resolve to succeed in the face of adversity. That character remains—as the performance of this generation of Marines in combat has proved.

The future holds some certainty. We can be sure the world will be a different place 25 years from now. Populations will shift; demographics will change. There will continue to be threats to our way of life, and an adaptive enemy will seek new ways to impose its will. *First to Fight* illustrates how the mission of the Marine Corps evolved under a similar set of circumstances to a balanced force in readiness—a naval expeditionary force.

The Marine Corps holds a special place in the heart of Americans. As Krulak writes, our society has come to expect "that when a Marine is called upon, he will be ready, and when committed to a fight, that he may be depended on to win." Our success today in Iraq's al Anbar Province stems from that same steady resolve and discipline as the brotherhood of warriors described in *First to Fight*.

Our ability to live hard and fight well has prepared us for the skilled and determined foe in Afghanistan.

A balanced expeditionary force—naval in character—remains the way forward for the Marine Corps, just as Brute Krulak had foreseen in his conclusion: "A forward-looking Corps must envision the full spectrum of possible employment and devise innovative, realistic, challenging, sometimes even hazardous, training." Marines, he writes, "must see no mission as too dangerous, no notice too short, no task too humble." Indeed, the nation expects her Marines to roll out fast and hit hard on the other end, and this is what makes *First to Fight* the marquee title of the Marine Corps Professional Reading Program today. ❄

First to Fight is available from the Naval Institute Press at www.usni.org.